

CIA/CMS

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Special Analysis

CIS:

Neighbors Compete for Influence in Muslim States

The breakup of the USSR has intensified competition among neighboring countries for influence with the Commonwealth's Muslim states. Turkey and Iran have made the most progress, but others are also becoming involved. The leaders of Central Asia are wary of expanding ties to Tehran but recognize that Iran's interest has stimulated action by other suitors. The risk is that, as conditions in the Muslim states grow worse, indigenous fundamentalist movements may gain strength and turn to Iran and other radical regimes for support.

Iran, Turkey, China, India, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan have established or announced plans to establish diplomatic relations with all the Muslim Commonwealth states. China, Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran now have agreements to expand cultural and economic ties, transportation and communications links, and joint ventures with CIS Muslim states. Official contacts are being supplemented by unofficial contacts of clergymen, intellectuals, and political activists.

Why the Competition

The collapse of the USSR has created a power vacuum on its southern periphery that many of its neighbors are now trying to fill. Iran is courting Commonwealth Muslims to bring the region into the Iranian fold and to prevent countries it sees as unfriendly—like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the US—from gaining influence on its northern border. Tehran is concentrating on building state-to-state political and economic ties. Western diplomats report Iranian leaders worry that instability in Central Asia could spread and that this has caused Tehran to play down its support for revolutionary change there.

Turkey is courting Commonwealth Muslims primarily to win friends and counteract Iranian influence, undercut Pan-Turkic nationalists at home, foster stability along its borders, and preempt perceived West European economic inroads. Ankara sees itself as a bridge between East and West and hopes to build on similarities in cultural, linguistic, and religious beliefs to develop ties to the five Turkic republics of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

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Moderate Suitors: Egypt and Saudi Arabia

Egypt and Saudi Arabia have begun a joint effort to counter Iran's courtship of the Muslim states and have developed a strategy aimed at helping Egypt keep its important trade ties to the former Soviet republics and buffering Saudi Arabia from direct pleas for financial aid. Both countries sent official delegations to the CIS late last month, and Egypt signed protocols in December to develop trade ties to several key Commonwealth states, according to press reports.

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Riyadh is still studying how to disburse the remaining \$1.2 billion it pledged to the former USSR, but it wants to avoid further commitments because of budget constraints. A reliable source says Saudi Arabia wants to promote economic development and religious activities in the Muslim republics through private Saudi businessmen and religious foundations. Increasing concern about Iran's influence there, however, may eventually prompt Riyadh to pledge additional official aid.

Part of the Egyptian-Saudi Arabian collaboration is being fueled by mutual concern that Tehran is actively exporting its brand of fundamentalism in the Commonwealth Muslim states.

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Riyadh may financially support efforts by Egyptian Islamic scholars to gain influence among Muslims in the CIS. Saudi officials probably believe such moderate scholars will be more successful than the more conservative Saudis. Press reports indicate Cairo hosted Islamic dignitaries from the CIS Muslim states this month and plans to establish Islamic information centers in the region.

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Others are also becoming active. Saudi Arabia is motivated by anti-Iranian sentiment but has funneled its limited aid to the establishment religious hierarchy in Tashkent, whose authority is in decline. Pakistan is moving in economically, in part to strengthen its strategic position vis-a-vis India. The breakup of the USSR has badly damaged India's once superior position, but New Delhi is not surrendering the field to Pakistan. With an eye to preventing Islamic unrest in its western regions, China was quick to establish diplomatic relations and to expand economic relations with CIS Muslims.

Commonwealth Attitudes

Commonwealth Muslim leaders, who achieved independence facing myriad economic and social problems and the end of aid from Russia, welcome the competition in the Islamic world and hope to use it to get aid from both Islamic and Western states. Among their neighbors, all governments see secular Turkey as a much more desirable partner than theocratic Iran. Russia, as well, prefers Turkish influence to Iran's. However, Muslim leaders will welcome whatever economic aid the Iranians can provide and will exploit Iran's interest to entice Western aid.

Prospects

As long as the current Russian-trained leaders remain in control, the region will tilt toward Turkey, but it is unclear how long this will continue in the current fluid situation. Tehran has a geographic advantage in Turkmenistan and cultural and linguistic advantage in Tajikistan, which is ethnically Persian and the most volatile state in the region.

Indigenous Islamic movements are playing a growing role in the politics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and to a much lesser extent in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where nationalists are using Islam as part of their effort to win popular support. While these movements owe nothing to Iran, Uzbek and Tajik Muslims share Iran's interest in making Islam the basis of the political system. The relaxation of control on Islam, moreover, will make it difficult even for the current authoritarian regimes to check Tehran's influence completely. Over the longer term, the region probably will be pulled increasingly into the orbit of nearby Muslim states, especially if relations with Russia, other CIS states, and the West fail to show results.

Special Analysis

IRAN:

Keeping Pressure on Iraq

Iran's preoccupation with competing for influence in the CIS has reduced the priority it gives to toppling Iraqi President Saddam Husayn. Tehran is continuing low-level support for Iraqi Shia and Kurdish insurgents, however, and is trying to promote unity among Iraqi opposition groups and to increase coordination with their other chief sponsors, Syria and Saudi Arabia.

Western diplomats in Tehran and Iraqi dissidents report that Iranian interest in Iraq has waned as Tehran has turned more attention to influencing the Muslim states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The failed Shia and Kurdish revolts last year, the reduced military threat from Iraq, and Saddam's perceived staying power are additional reasons for Tehran's shift to a more patient strategy.

Tehran is now concentrating on keeping Iraq isolated while it tries to develop ways to influence, if not initiate, a succession struggle in Baghdad. Iraqi dissidents have told US diplomats that Tehran is encouraging disparate Iraqi opposition groups to unite and is seeking to coordinate its support with that of Syria and Saudi Arabia;

Tehran's paramilitary support still concentrates on Shia insurgents. The Badr force of about 2,000 Iraqi Shias is refitting in southwestern Iran after suffering heavy losses last year. Tehran may be considering whether to reinforce the group with Iraqi prisoners of war transferred from Saudi Arabia;

Tehran is nevertheless ready to increase military aid to the Iraqi opposition and to have Revolutionary Guard or regular forces intervene if Saddam falters.

Tehran also would be tempted by any opportunity to strike at the dissident Iranian Mojahedin-e Khalq forces in Iraq, even though such a plan failed last year.

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